

Speak Up or Burn Out Five Crucial Conversations that Drive Educational Excellence

By David Maxfield

A little more than fifty years ago, forest service smoke jumpers learned that in certain crucial circumstances the best way to save their lives was to do something outrageously contrary to their natural tendencies.

In August of 1949, fifteen men parachuted into a mountainous area of Montana to put out a growing fire. Within minutes, the fire exploded out of control, spreading at 660 feet per minute and threatening to consume the firefighters. Fourteen of the men turned away from the fire and ran for the ridge. One did not. He turned *toward* the approaching inferno and set the grass in front of him on fire. As the grass finished burning he yelled for his comrades to drop onto the resulting ashes to save their lives. In the end, he was the only survivor.

Teachers often find themselves caught in the fire. Challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, poor administrative and parental support, loss of control in the classroom, and bureaucratic red tape are enough to make any teacher want to abandon the fight for educational excellence and run for the ridgeline. But we can't outrun these fires. With research showing that one in three educators report stress-related problems, teachers who run from the flames end up burned out. Additionally, running from the flames not only sacrifices educational excellence, it actually puts a teacher's health and career at risk.

When we retreat, we cross a line between simple stress and more serious burnout. In burnout, our relationships become increasingly depersonalized and we become chronically pessimistic. As we withdraw from our relationships and grow convinced of our own powerlessness, we enter a downward spiral of pessimism that can feel impossible to escape.

Teachers in or approaching burnout suffer depleted energy, lowered resistance to illness, increased absenteeism, and decreased effectiveness on the job. Consequently, everyone suffers when teachers are trapped in this cycle of stress, withdrawal, and burnout.

But not all teachers are consumed in this cycle. Some cope well and remain resilient in the same environments that overwhelm others. We surveyed more than four hundred educators, and discovered that nearly one in five have figured out how to approach even the toughest fires and quench them. We can learn from their successes.

It turns out that a key to coping with stress in the classroom is to take action akin to running toward the fire rather than running away. Specifically, the best way to fight the creeping depersonalization and pessimism that underlie burnout is to take active steps to address and resolve the problems that threaten to consume us.

This path begins with investing the time and effort to hold five crucial conversations. In our research, we learned that teachers can master the stressors in their environment by engaging more consistently and more effectively in five conversations that are common, impactful, and, too often, *undiscussable*.

The five crucial conversations that drive educational excellence while preventing teacher burnout address the issues of:

1. Unsupportive school leaders. Many school principals and assistant principals are incredibly supportive. They work hard to remove obstacles, cut through red tape, and get teachers the resources they need. However, when one or more of these school leaders is not supportive, they create high levels of stress and prevent teachers from being as successful as they could be. One teacher we interviewed shared the following:

"One of my assistant principals is very unsupportive. For example, when I send a student to his office due to behavior in class, he sends him back without telling me what action he's taken. The student often escalates again and spends more time in the hallway by this assistant principal's office. When I've discussed this with the assistant principal, he says, 'You can assume I did my job.'"

Nearly two-thirds of the teachers we surveyed reported having one or more school leaders who are unsupportive. This lack of support creates stress, makes teachers' jobs more difficult, and threatens the morale of the entire staff.

But the problem isn't just that teachers encounter unsupportive school leaders. The problem is made worse by how teachers handle this politically sensitive situation. According to the survey results:

- 50 percent of teachers say they discuss unsupportive leaders with friends and family.
- More than 66 percent share their concerns with fellow teachers.
- Only one in five share their full concerns with the unsupportive leader.

Those rare teachers who turn toward the fire and have the crucial conversation with their leader are twice as likely to get the support they need. And, not surprisingly, they also end up significantly more satisfied with the work environment in their schools.

2. Teachers who are failing in their classrooms. Teachers are often the first to know when one of their peers is failing in the classroom. They see or hear visible signs of conflict, they hear complaints from students and/or parents, and they often witness for themselves the poor teaching or classroom management behaviors. One teacher shared the following

"For a year I worked with a teacher who had retired from another state and had taken a position here to pad her retirement. She had no classroom management, rapport with the students, or direction with curriculum. It was a pretty bleak picture considering this was the

career she had just retired from. I think she wanted the cake without having to do any of the cooking!"

More than three-quarters of the teachers we surveyed reported having one or more peers who are failing in the classroom. These teachers see the impact of failure, which includes poor student learning, more work for other teachers, and increased stress for all.

But the vast majority of teachers run away from this fire, not toward it. Only 13 percent have the crucial conversation and share their full concerns with the failing teacher.

We wondered whether some of the teachers who are not having this crucial conversation might be discussing the problem with a school leader instead—perhaps counting on the school leader to correct the situation. We found that 35 percent of the teachers refer the problem to a school leader and ask them to intervene. But only half of these school leaders follow up with the failing teacher.

The teachers who step up to this crucial conversation and resolve the problem with their failing peers are significantly more satisfied with their school, more committed to staying at the school, more engaged as teachers, and less cynical about the education process.

3. Teachers who let their peers down. Teachers don't just work with students. They work with other teachers both within their department and across the school. They collaborate on curriculum issues, team teaching, and a wide variety of critical issues including discipline. And more than two-thirds of teachers feel dissatisfied with the performance of one or more of their peers. For example:

"I'm currently sharing middle school band rehearsals with our 5th and 6th grade director. She is frequently late for rehearsals and not prepared for her rehearsal responsibilities. It is difficult to develop expectations and consistency for the students if the director doesn't demonstrate this herself."

This kind of poor performance has consequences. The top three cited by teachers are increased problems for school leaders, peers, and parents. Yet fewer than one in five teachers has had the crucial conversation with their peer. The few teachers who speak up and share their full concerns with a non-performing peer are more than twice as likely to succeed in solving the problem.

4. Parents who fail to support learning. Parents play a large role in the education system by facilitating student learning, encouraging good student behavior, and supporting their children's teachers. Seventy percent of teachers are currently struggling with parents who are failing to do their part to support their child's education.

As one teacher shared,

"I recently had a student who found out that his biological father was not the person he knew as dad. It led to an ugly divorce. The student's mother is an emotional wreck, and she has told her son that neither his "dad" nor his biological father wants anything to do with him. It is no surprise that this student has zero self-esteem and is acting out in my class."

Teachers describe the top three impacts of an unhelpful parent as preventing the student from learning, creating problems and stress for the teacher, and creating problems for school leaders. But only a third of these teachers have had the crucial conversation with the parent. Teachers who confront and resolve their concerns with unsupportive parents are significantly more satisfied with their school and more confident that they are making a difference.

5. Students who have behavioral problems. Some students are more ready and willing to learn than others. Some are interested, disciplined, and able to follow through. However, 86 percent of the teachers in our study struggle with at least two students who are easily distracted, exhibit behavioral problems, and get in the way of their own learning. From our interviews:

"I see students trying to get other students' attention and thinking it is cool to talk back or act up. I also see students acting up due to situations in their lives, such as family, friends, or medications. I also see students who can't deal with situations at home before they come to school. They can get so upset that when you simply remind them to sit up they start screaming."

Of course these problem students create problems for others. The top consequences teachers cite are:

- The behavior inhibits the student's own learning.
- The behavior makes the teacher's job more difficult.
- The behavior makes it difficult for other students to learn.
- The behavior creates stress and tension in the classroom.

But when it comes to problem students, there is good news. Unlike the previous four situations, teachers generally step up to this crucial conversation. Two-thirds of teachers share their full concerns with the problem student, and 71 percent say this discussion drives improvements in the student's behavior.

If these teachers would take the same initiative to have skillful discussions with unsupportive principals, assistant principals, fellow

teachers, and parents, they would improve students' learning, create a better work environment, and reduce stress.

A Few Tips to Get Started

These crucial conversations can be tricky to navigate. Sharing concerns with a school leader, confronting a poor performing colleague, and dealing with an unsupportive parent all require skill. We've spent thousands of hours watching what teachers and other professionals do to succeed in these dicey moments. Here are a few approaches that will reduce your stress and increase your chance of a good outcome.

1. **Don't wait till you're angry.** Less skillful people put off handling crucial issues until they're on the verge of losing their temper. For example, an assistant principal has been on your case about an important student testing issue for weeks. Your patience is diminishing. You feel unappreciated, blamed, and defensive. Now is not the time to talk—but unfortunately, it's in these emotionally charged moments that most people finally speak up. The time to talk is when you see the problem emerging and have not yet become emotionally invested. Stop putting off addressing these issues and you'll start dealing with them when they're emotionally manageable.
2. **Ask the humanizing question.** When confronting a colleague who's not pulling his or her weight, don't open your mouth until you've opened your mind. When others let us down we make matters worse by villainizing them in our minds. We may tell ourselves that they are selfish, egotistical, lazy, etc. Sometimes these judgments happen so quickly that we aren't even conscious of them. If you find yourself losing patience with the person with whom you need to have a crucial conversation, it may be a sign you need to change your view of them before you start to talk. Turn them from a villain into a human by asking yourself, "Why would a reasonable, rational, decent person do what they're doing?" When you see them as a person with a flaw rather than a villain with no soul, you'll approach them far more effectively.
3. **Start with safety.** Begin your crucial conversation by finding common ground. Demonstrate respect for the other person. Point out goals and interests the two of you share. When you do this before diving into a deep discussion of the problems, you create a condition of safety that enables healthy dialogue. When you fail to do this, you commonly provoke defensiveness. Creating safety is the key for succeeding at crucial conversations. Teachers who do it best build healthy relationships they can draw on when under stress.

4. **Eliminate excuses.** We found that the most common reason teachers don't hold crucial conversations is that they tell themselves, "It's not my job." For example, a teacher appears incompetent at her duties. A teacher who sees this colleague's problem most clearly is in the best position to give her helpful feedback. But he doesn't. Why? Because "It's not his job." Interestingly, it isn't just teachers who tend to make this excuse for not speaking up. Administrators, district managers, and just about everyone found a way to rationalize away their responsibility to speak up. Those who are best at holding crucial conversations don't consider whether it's in their job description to speak up, they consider whether it's in their interest to voice their concerns. Consequently, they tend speak up far more frequently.

5. **Dialogue not monologue.** Finally, the most skillful teachers we studied have a different goal in their crucial conversations. The less skillful come at the conversation as though it is a monologue. Their goal is to speak their minds and their hope is the other person is committed to hearing them. This egocentric approach to crucial conversations inevitably provokes defensiveness, eventually convincing the teacher it was a waste of time to even try. Teachers who seek out dialogue experience the reverse. When they come to the conversation willing to share their views but are sincerely interested in the perspective of others—in fact, intensely curious about others' realities—they frequently experience what they enact. Their openness invites openness in others. Their willingness to be wrong makes it safe for others to admit to shortcomings. When your goal is dialogue rather than monologue, your crucial conversations lead to mutual learning rather than dueling defenses.

The environment in our schools is not likely to become less stressful in the near future. In fact, we may see an increased level of stress. The good news is that teachers who fight the natural human tendency to respond to stress by retreating from action and relationships can do a lot to keep stress from building into burnout. Regularly engaging in healthy crucial conversations that strengthen relationships, improve teamwork, and influence positive change can be enormously helpful in not only avoiding being consumed, but also in restoring much of the meaning and joy that attracted teachers to education in the first place.

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